

Lake Michigan Fisheries Team
September 8, 2003
Plymouth

DRAFT

Next meeting: December 9, 2003. Plymouth, WI.

Present: Mark Opgenorth, Al Kaas, Randy Link, Pradeep Hirethota, Paul Peeters, Tom Hansen, Justine Hasz, George Boronow, Steve Surendonk, Brian Sloss (UWSP), Fred Binkowski (UWM), Dick Rebicek, Brad Eggold, Lee Meyers, Matt Coffaro, Dave Giebtbrock, Ken Royseck, Steve Fajfer, Al Niebur

1) Brief updates

Time was allowed for short updates and reminders of topics of interest. The following were mentioned.

- WF/GLSFC meeting – September 27
 - To be attended by Bill Horns, Brad Eggold, and Scott Hassett. LE will be represented by Tom Hansen and/or Ron Preder.
- Thermal marking of chinook otoliths
 - None planned by WI this year. Feasible at \$1K to \$5K in future years.
- Stocking cuts for 2003-04 will continue in 2004-05
- Vessel safety document status (status, Jung suggestion)
 - Mike Toney will review the Jim Jung suggestion regarding monitoring as part of contracts and/or cooperative agreements.
- Live transport advisory question for spring hearings
 - This has been submitted by Hansen and Meyers
- Brook trout stocking (Buettner letter)
- Modeling workshop/plans for the various models
- NRDA projects
 - LMFT overview memo (August 5) has been forwarded to Bruce Baker. Individual project briefs have not yet been submitted, other than Wild Rose.
- LMC and LMTC notes
 - Bill Horns will e-mail copies of LMC note to LMFT core members; LMTC notes have been circulated.
- BKD in coho at Lake Mills and Westfield
 - Latest data show prevalence at Lake Mills not exceeding 10%. Permission being sought to treat fish with antibiotic.

2) Lake Michigan fisheries staffing

Background (from agenda). In the midst of budget and staffing uncertainty, we have the opportunity to make suggestions regarding staffing to carry out the Lake Michigan fisheries program. One of the facts of life is that the FH program will lose a number of positions statewide, effective July 1, 2004. The FH Board has suggested that the Plymouth biologist position be one of the positions to be cut. The LMFT discussed the issue, and Bill Horns drafted a memo (August 11) to the LMFT Guidance Team on behalf of the LMFT. Steve Hewett then asked that, assuming that the Lake Michigan program will lose one position, the LMFT make a recommendation about the position that should be cut. A related problem is what steps will be taken to redistribute work load from positions now vacant, until such time as those positions are filled.

Action. The LMFT did not reach consensus. We can continue the discussion when we meet in December. We identified four options for the least bad choice for a position to cut: 1) Plymouth biologist (Kubisiak position), 2) boat captain (Cornell position), 3) Green Bay biologist (Lychwick position), and 4) an unidentified existing position (this option was recognized as a can of worms – or is it Pandora’s box? – but possibly worth considering further). Comments on these options included the following:

- The Plymouth position is responsible for the creel survey, which the LMFT has in the past recognized as the highest priority data.
- If we cannot fill the boat captain position, we have no backup for Don Beilfuss on the Barney, placing our large boat program in jeopardy.
- The Plymouth position, if filled, could take on a broader role of overseeing SCAA models.
- If the Plymouth position is not filled, the essential duties must be reassigned.
- The Lychwick position is already slated for filling.
- The Lychwick position covers some inland work also, and NER is also coping with one or more other inland vacancies.
- We might have to cut back field surveys on the lake and/or Green Bay if the boat captain position were lost.
- Some of Al Blizel’s time could be used to help fill the gap if the Plymouth position is lost.
- Because the boat captain position requires special skills and training, it is the hardest to fill by adjusting duties of other staff.
- It would help to identify the best option if we could identify the lowest priority activities. Some suggestions were offered (lake trout surveys, detail of creel survey analyses, whitefish and bloater chub work), but time did not allow a full discussion of these and other possibilities.

3) Weir management

Background (from agenda). On both the Kewaunee and Root Rivers, large chinook salmon runs are expected. In order to maximize the coho egg-take at BAFF and the Skamania and coho egg-take at RRSF, it would be necessary to handle all the chinooks, which would place unreasonable demands on staff time and energy. One alternative on the Kewaunee is to bypass chinooks until the coho run starts, and then run all fish through the facility. One alternative on the Root is to allow some passage upstream around the facility until the coho run starts, and to use shockers to supplement the harvest of spawnins Skamania in both rivers. Long-term options to alleviate this problem include minimizing the stocking of chinook in the brood rivers, cutting back the Skamania program, obtaining Skamania eggs each year from Indiana, and obtaining coho eggs each year from Michigan.

Action. 1) Short term. Both facilities will pass all chinooks until around the first of October. Fish will be passed through the facilities when deemed appropriate to catch significant numbers of Skamania and/or cohos. Staff safety will be a factor in deciding when to close the gates. Regions will both use shockers to try and find additional Skamania. We will look into obtaining Skamania from Indiana. 2) It was recognized that, in part, the current dilemma is a consequence of low flows and, therefore, unpredictable and small runs of steelhead and coho. Three long term options were listed to address the problem in the future: minimize chinook stocking in brood rivers (possibly including stocking them at the river mouth instead of upstream), cut back or eliminate the Skamania program (possibly by obtaining eggs from Indiana), regard only one of the two facilities as a backup to Strawberry Creek for chinooks.

4) Green Bay yellow perch rule

Background (from agenda). The present commercial harvest limit and sport bag limit for yellow perch from Green Bay expire June 30, 2004. Because we assume that harvest restrictions should continue,

we have determined to advance a new rule to extent the present harvest limits or establish different ones. The Natural Resources Board will be asked in October to approve hearings on a new yellow perch rule.

Action. Justine summarized survey data from this summer. YOY yellow perch were abundant. It is essential to document good over-winter survival before authorizing increased harvests. These fish will not enter the sport and commercial fisheries until 2005, at the earliest. The LMFT recommends asking the NRB to approve hearings on a rule that would change the current sunset date from June 30, 2004, to June 30, 2007.

5) Steelhead harvest

Background (from agenda). A little over a year ago, John Kubisiak circulated a memo regarding steelhead exploitation in Lake Michigan. He came up with an estimated harvest of almost 20,000 brood stock fish annually, and concluded that “you can no longer argue that a bag limit reduction would not be effective unless all states do it.” Should this issue be raised in an advisory question at the 2004 spring hearings?

Action. Discussion item. Steve Hogler reported that by December we should have data from genetic analyses conducted by Kim Scribner. Because those data are pertinent to this issue, further discussion was postponed.

6) Working relationship with the FWS’ Green Bay FRO

Background (from agenda). We are working with the FWS’ Green Bay Fisheries Resources Office biologists in four important areas: 1) Green Bay yellow perch assessments, 2) statistical catch-at-age modeling, 3) lakewide lake sturgeon restoration plan development, and 4) lakewide lake trout restoration plan development.

Action. Discussion item.

7) Sturgeon meeting

Background (from agenda). The first Lake Michigan Lake Sturgeon Task Group meeting will have been completed the week prior to this meeting. The Task Group will soon advise the Lake Michigan Committee (LMC), which within a very short time will consider whether or not to support the Wisconsin proposal (or any variant of it) to stock the Manitowoc and Milwaukee Rivers this fall. Bill Horns is the Wisconsin representative to the LMC.

Action. Several LMFT members had attended the LSTG meeting, and shared their observations. Although the LSTG discussed the Wisconsin stocking proposal, it did not attempt to arrive at a clear recommendation. A short report from the LSTG Steering Committee is expected by the week of September 15. When that is in hand, Bill Horns will convene a conference call meeting of the LMC to discuss Wisconsin’s stocking plans.

8) Feral brood stock report card

Background (from agenda). Bill Horns will bring an outline of a data summary format for an annual review of the feral brood stock management program.

Action. This idea was enthusiastically received by the LMFT, especially by Paul Peeters, who said, “Now we’re really smoking” (or something like that, meaning that this is a great idea that should be pursued vigorously).

9) GLFC sport fishing advisor

Background (from agenda). The LMFT agreed to ask Craig Bender if he would be interested in serving as the Sport Fishing Advisor to the Great Lake Fishery Commission. Unfortunately, Craig will not be able to do this.

Action. Several candidates were suggested. Bill Horns will make a selection, get it approved by Mike Staggs, and approach the individual.

10) Public Resources Depredation Order for cormorants

Background (from agenda). The FWS is expected to create a new “Public Resources Depredation Order” to allow state agencies to kill cormorants, without a federal permit, when the birds are causing conflicts with public resources, subject to FWS oversight.

Action. Discussion item.

11) Brown trout production

Background. Hatchery limitations will require a 10% reduction in production of large fingerling Wild Rose strain brown trout for stocking in the fall of 2004. The reduced stocking could be replaced with St. Croix strain fingerlings.

Action. The LMFT elected not to replace the Wild Rose strain fish with St. Croix strain.